

The Virtual Doctor Home Page: A Lay Public Medical Resource

Abigail R. Williams, R.N., B.S.N., J.D., M.P.H.

Ellis & Ellis, Worcester, MA

Kenneth A. Williams, M.D., F.A.C.E.P.

The University of Massachusetts Medical Center, Worcester, MA

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, and particularly the World Wide Web, offers a vast array of medical information for the lay public to browse. Some of this information is actually intended for medical professionals, and includes technical terminology, theoretical discussions, "gallows humor" and other features that may be misunderstood by the lay public. Other information is intended for the lay public, but is from "alternative" sources, and may not reflect accepted standards of medical care. There is little guidance available for the lay user attempting to peruse this wealth of information. For the casual browser, there may be no need of guidance, but for the person with a real and specific medical concern, the import of accurate information is obvious. Many from the latter group turn to medical discussion forums, groups, and lists, where they post questions to the medical professionals who populate these discussion formats. Sometimes such questions are answered seriously, but often the answers are vague, derogatory, and the questioner labeled a "polluter". Following the model of print media medical discussion columns, we designed a World Wide Web page, VrDr, The Virtual Doctor Home Page, that provides accurate and thorough answers to medical questions from the lay public.

METHODS

The need for such a service became apparent after reading medical discussions posted on commercial services and Internet newsgroups and lists. The decision to organize the service after a print media model was made in the interest of editorial judgment, control over time involved in providing the service, and avoiding duty to any specific patient. Graphics and initial HTML/CGI programming were subcontracted, with the design successfully providing a shell

that could be manipulated by a novice HTML user. Arrangements were made through a local Internet access provider, and a domain name [vrdr.com] was registered. Initial content was compiled from recent works authored by the editors, with the hope of attracting questions from visitors to the VrDr Home Page.

DISCUSSION

Well-educated patients are more likely to partake in preventive health measures, use health care resources wisely, and understand their role in maintaining their own health. The Internet offers another forum for patient education. However, without guidance, the lay public has little hope of understanding the technical medical information exchanged in professional lists and discussion groups and may be misled by "alternative" health information. We felt there was a need for accurate, timely, and thorough medical information on the Internet, and noted that both health care professionals and the lay public found questions posted to professional discussion groups [e.g. "Please help. My sister was just diagnosed with..."] a less-than-effective means of obtaining such information. The format chosen, adapted from print media "medical information columns", allows thoughtfully prepared responses to selected questions without entering into the practice of "virtual medicine", where a physician-patient relationship is established through electronic communication.

CONCLUSION

A World Wide Web home page was created to provide a "medical information" service. The chosen format provides access to accurate medical information content in a means acceptable to medical and legal professionals as well as the lay public.